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The McSorley Connection

Bookers for Larry King, Phil Donahue and other ringmasters of the talk-show circus have had no luck with Father Richard McSorley of Georgetown University. He said no to all. McSorley is the 78-year-old Jesuit priest Bill Clinton chanced upon in London and Oslo in

BY TIM BRINTON

1969. As a Georgetown undergraduate in the mid-1960s, Clinton, like most students, revered the priest-professor for his courses on peace, justice and nonviolence.

President Bush, gripped by something between an obsession and a fetish, has twice used Clinton's antiwar activities in London and Oslo to club the Democrat's "character and judgment." Bush raised the issue first in a Larry King interview on Oct. 7. On Oct. 9, after a Clinton explanation of his travels in Europe and Moscow in the fall of 1969, Bush backed off and said the subject was closed. Then during the debate last Sunday, it was on the agenda again, a case of a flipflopflip.

As an old friend and admirer of Father McSorley, I'm relieved that he's been saying no to Larry, Phil and the boys. I couldn't imagine him being badgered by Donahue, unless it was Lent and the priest needed some extra penitential suffering.

When I spoke with McSorley the other morning, he was bemused by the intensity of the media's attention. More than 100 requests for interviews had come in. That's not quite the highest journalistic honor the media can bestow—there's the driveway stakeout and after that rooting through your garbage—but it was enough to let the priest suspect that he was being asked to play a role in a search-and-destroy mission with Bill Clinton as the victim.

Headlines were easily envisioned: "Peacenik Priest Duped Young Clinton" or "Anti-American Jesuit Turned Clinton Against U.S." The latter is the dead horse George Bush tried beating in the first debate: "I think it's wrong to demonstrate against your country or organize demonstrations against your own country on foreign soil."

McSorley, who wrote a few words in a 1978 book, "Peace Eyes," about meeting Clinton in London and Oslo, is astonished at how Bush and his handlers are smearing Clinton. The young man's sinister organizing in London was asking McSorley to say a prayer for peace at an interdenominational service at St. Mark's Church. After religious hymns were sung, participants, carrying small white crosses, walked in a procession to the U.S. Embassy.

Nearly 23 years have passed since then. McSorley, who asserts that Clinton has told the truth about the event and his role in it, recalls: "That ceremony meant a great deal to me personally because I was a POW for three years in a Japanese prison camp during World War II. I am forever grateful to those Americans—at home and abroad—who prayed for me during that war."

At the church service in London, McSorley led the congregation in the peace prayer of St. Francis of Assisi. "If more people prayed for peace," McSorley says, "as Bill Clinton did in 1969 and Francis of Assisi did 800 years ago, the world would be a better place."

It might also be a place where someone like Richard McSorley—a priest of courage and one of the most loved professors at Georgetown in the past 30 years—wouldn't find his name and reputation smeared on the House floor. The assassinator of his character has been Rep. Robert Dornan, the California Republican whose unfactual and dirty attacks on Clinton and on

McSorley in early October caught the attention of Bush.

The president invited Dornan to the White House for a strategy session on slimeballing, days after the congressman sullied McSorley as "a Marxist priest" who is "pro-fascist," and "still poisoning the minds" of Georgetown students with "garbage." Worse, McSorley is a friend of Father Robert Drinan "who was also a big

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apologist for Hanoi and all of the communist countries around the world."

For such clearheadedness, the party appointed Dornan co-chairman of the Bush-Quayle campaign in California. The congressman's lies, shouted on the House floor and carried by C-SPAN, were at first seen as more rantings from the leading nutcake in Congress, a politician dismissed by most of his colleagues as a joke. Not by Bush. At this moment of low-in-the-polls desperation, any right-wing looney is welcome to strategize at the White House.

With all this blowing over, at least slowly, Father McSorley remains in fine spirits. He had heart surgery awhile back and hovered on the brink for a time. When I visited him in the hospital, he was, as always, cheerful, prayerful, and telling stories about his old students at Georgetown. Now he has another story.